

Report on one-day Interactive theatre workshop held at the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, Tezpur University; November 11, 2019, for students of M.A in Communication for Development (C4D)

Facilitator:

The one-day intensive workshop was facilitated by **Ravi Ramaswamy**, a Bangalore based Development practitioner and Theatre of the oppressed trainer with over a decade's worth of experience in the practice. He is a trustee at the Centre for Community Dialogue and Change (CCDC), Bangalore.

Ravi offers courses in Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed to students and professionals of all backgrounds to explore various themes amongst which are masculinity, violence, gender and sexuality, social psychology, democracy etc.

He is currently engaged in a forum theatre project to identify the struggles and aspirations of young farmers.

Attendees:

The workshop was attended by both third and first semester students of Masters in Communication for Development (C4D), Tezpur University. In all, a total of sixteen students participated in the workshop.



*Figure 1*Participants in a group picture

Workshop purpose:

It is, amongst other things, to further a practical understanding of the third-semester students on the importance of interactive theatre (theatre of the oppressed) in development communications and as a tool for community engagement.

Workshop in Brief

It begun at forty minutes passed the hours of nine on Monday, November 11, 2019, with almost all participants present.

The session began with an introductory remark by Dr Joya Chakraborty, HOD, Department of Mass Communication, Tezpur University. According to her, the workshop was necessitated on the grounds of serving the practical needs of students, who have had the privilege of being introduced to the subject matter on Theatre of the oppressed in theory as part of the C4D course curriculum.

“I always say my knowledge of the ‘theatre of the oppressed’ is self-taught. Here, you have the privilege of learning from a practitioner, who is best suited to teach it...”

Later, participants were introduced to the interactive games, which served as the basis for the workshop- prominent amongst which are, Cover the Space, Name playback, College Student Closing, Blind Car/Bus, Circle of Knots, Colombian Hypnosis, Carnival in Rio, Glass cobra etc.

The workshop was climaxed with an introduction to Image and forum theatres and Sculpting.

Theatre of Oppressed

Theatre of the oppressed was pioneered by Augusto Boal in his works with the Brazilian peasant population.

The form is now popular across the globe for social and political activism, resolution of individual and group struggles, community building, therapy and treatment and in the making of government legislations.

The form is neither theatre as entertainment, nor for propaganda, but a form of popular community-based education which is based on the vision of Paulo Freire and his landmark work on education, Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

This form of theatre essentially is a tool that helps ‘unfreeze,’ break identified patterns that impeded real communication among communities by making them aware of their full potentials through dialogues.

Brief on participatory Games facilitated during the Workshop

Cover the space

This activity allowed for a reflection on the use of individual space while respecting other occupants of the same. So, participants were given the leverage under the instruction of the facilitator to ‘walk the space.’- which in this case is the venue of the workshop. Each individual had the opportunity to cover a given distance without bumping into anyone.

The next phase in this game was for all participants to while walking their space observe others without talking but stop or move, whenever there was such action from any participant from within the vast space. This awakened a sense of alertness and being observant of others in the exercise of one's freedom.

Outcome

Based on participants feedback, this activity, most importantly; made it possible for one to reflect on communication by observation- the rule of thumb for participants to abide by the rules governing the game without faltering.

College Student Closing

This game started with participants forming groups of three each. Of the three persons in each group, one represented a college with the remaining two being a student and 'closing.' The ones representing the college and closing came together to form a structure, which served the purpose of a structure over the student. The idea is every student is deserving of a college to study.

Of the total participants present, one was left without a group. After the structure (college) is formed, the one without a group in want of one takes the centre stage; he/ she calls out one of the designations (College, student, closing). In the event of calling out student, all students within a structure together with the one left without a college, move in search of a new one for enrolment. In the end, one student again is left without a college leading to a repeat of the process altogether.

Outcome

There was a constant struggle for a college by students and the general search for an association by all. Participants in this activity were on keen alert to find a student for their college and vice versa.

According to a participant "It didn't feel good being left alone without anyone to form a college with, or find a college as a student. Hence, there was a need to constantly be on the alert, in order to find a college. It felt good to belong and not left alone."

Name playback

This activity served as an introductory ground for other activities and games to follow through seamlessly. It offered participants the chance to introduce themselves to each other in a fun way.

This game is especially useful when there are new people present. It started with a participant pronouncing his name aloud for all present accompanied by a demonstration. Other participants after, repeat the name and mimic the demonstration accordingly. This is repeated by the entire group until the last participant.

Outcome

It served an icebreaker. Participants familiarised with each other. It also helped loosed the hitherto tense atmosphere for the utmost participation of all. In the words of Ravi "It is a simple icebreaker useful for introducing people to each other and helping people learn each other's names."

Blind car/Bus

This activity required participants segregated into groups of two each. Instructively, in a defined alignment, the one in front with eyes closed only moved, having being signalled via a touch from the one behind.

With eyes closed, the member in front moves in a defined direction depending on the nature of tap/touch received. A touch/tap on the right shoulder meant a move in the right direction and vice versa.

However, a touch/tap at the back signals a halt in movement, with a touch on the head signalling a forward/start movement.



Figure 2 Cross section of participants in the Blind bus game

Outcome

Reflecting on the activity, members viewed the exercise as depicting the struggles of the blind in society.

Colombian Hypnosis

In pairs of two, participants had the opportunity of either acting in the position of a leader or follower. The leader led by gesturing with the palm (hand) with the follower having no other option except to follow the direction as is being gestured.



Figure 3 Participants in demonstration of the Colombian Hypnosis game

Outcome

According to feedback solicited, this game made participants rethink leadership and followership. Sample of the participant shared the view that “leadership was empowering and offered a sense of fulfilment and authority.” Others held that “it was intriguing to know you have the power to have others do things your way.”

These observations according to them triggered the desire for a position of leadership always. Interestingly, however, others held that “leadership was a difficult undertaking considering the responsibilities attached to it.

For this reason, they preferred being/ acting in the position of a follower. Their desire, as shared, is premised on the belief that being a follower presents an opportunity to be in the position to act, offering a sense of accomplishment and responsibility.

Carnival in Rio

This is a community-building exercise conducted with four different groups, with four members each. At the group level, the instruction was for members to individually produce a sound but in the long, achieve sync with other members of the group irrespective of their individual sounds.

Then each group was given the opportunity to present the process each undertook to arrive at the ultimate sound.

Outcome

Of the discussion, based on the process presentation, it was realised that though each individual started with a sound peculiar to them, such was abandoned for the common good of group uniformity.

“I like my sound but I chose to abandon it for the group’s good. I realised sticking to mine sound made it difficult for us to achieve a pleasant sound as a group...”

Regardless of group peculiarity, it was common for individuals to abandon their sounds for a dominant one voluntarily. Members shared was due to individual feelings of being over-powered, preference for the sound of others amongst other things.

Image Theatre & Forum Theatre

Image theatre draws on the use of body shape to express emotions and feelings. With this activity, a volunteer from amongst the audience started by assuming an expression through a demonstrated bodily posture. Participant audience each took a turn to participate by adding to the bodily expressive demonstration as it suits their understanding and appreciation.

In an adaptive manner, the image theatre set the pace for discussion amongst the participants, who shared their views on what to them worked best.

The opportunity was given to each, based on opinion shared to come up stage to demonstrate their share of a solution to the problem on display.

This brought to the fore, the idea of participation, where members easily more than sharing their views, had the chance to practicalize it. This gave basis to leading change from a much pragmatize point of view till the best solution according to the entire group was arrived at.

The Glass Cobra

The workshop was climaxed with the Glass Cobra activity explained below:

It is a widely appreciated exercise developed by Augusto Boal based on a Chilean legend. Here, participants stood in a circle close to each other and with eyes closed feel the head and shoulders of the person in front of them.

They remember details of the ‘head’ so that they can later locate it. Then the participants walk away from one another and with eyes closed try to locate the person who was in front of them. Once they locate their partner, they place both their hands on the partner’s shoulders. The game continues until the circle reforms.

It was an exhilarating experience for participants, who were awestricken by the reality of returning to the normal circle shape, even with their eyes closed.

Reference

Shankar, P. R. (2012). A three-day workshop on the theatre of the oppressed in a Nepalese medical school. *Australasian Medical Journal*, 5(8), 440–442. <https://doi.org/10.4066/AMJ.2012.1351>

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